

## Night in Jamesburg

Me and Custer went up to the Adirondacks for a little fishing excursion Friday and Saturday. First day of trout Season. He been real good, sitting still, real quiet in the boat. We was out on Schroon Lake half the day before I catch two fish big enough for the both of us. Custer likes to eat ‘em raw, but I make him wait ‘till I taken out the bones an scales. That’s when he starts barking, cause he been out on that boat all along and hungry. So I slice up his first, then get to work on grilling mine.

Anyone who ever said bulldogs ain’t smart shoulda met my dog. Custer will chase off the rabbits that get into our yard, an he’s patient enough to ambush the gophers. And he’s not like those cats that’ll kill a thing, and then leave it on your front steps. He’ll eat ‘em right then and there. I factor it into part of his diet, ya-see. If he helps keep my garden growing, I’ll throw him a carrot from it now and again. Dogs are like us, omnivores. They eat anything.

I get back to Jamesburg, New Jersey about nine in the morning. When I park my truck in the driveway I see Randall sitting in a lawn chair looking at my house. When I get closer I see he’s got a cup-a-coffee in one hand, and his antique shotgun in the other, pointing it at my front door.

I says to him, “Don’t tell me you were waiting for somebody to come outta that door, ‘cause I was on vacation!”

He says, “Heck no! You ain’t got no garage for that loud-ass jalopy. I know when you aren’t at home.”

“Well, what *are* you doing then?”

“I’m waiting for *something* to come out of that house of yours. An I got Shawn posted ‘round back in case the bugger leaves from the other side.”

“Randall, I’m surprised this is how you decide to spend your Sunday—the day of rest!”

“This isn’t recreation you twit!” Randall pointed towards my door with his gun, “Whatever the hell’s holed up inside-a your house attacked my dog last night.”

“Attacked *your* dog,” I say, “then why would it be in *my* house?”

“Well, I was getting to that... Around four in the morning. I seen—I mean, I heard it. Terrible like hissing and growling. It scared the hell out of Ralphie. You should see, it sliced off the tip of his ear. That dog’s probably still shivering right now.

“Shawn woke up, turned on the lights out back, and said he saw something go running towards the fence, quick as a lash. Said it looked like a porcupine, but he never seen one run so quick. And after it squeezed under the fence we heard a *crash* from inside-a your house. Go look, it tore a hole through the screen on your back window.”

“Man,” I says, “This is why I leave the state soon as trout season starts up. Nevermind cleaner water an all, healthier fish upstate New York. I don’t get no peace round here. Now point that gun somewheres else! If you’ll excuse me I got to go investigate this little critter.”

Then Randall stood up likes he’s going into battle or sumpthin, hoisting that darnéd boomstick a-his, like **‘I’m coming too.’**

And I told him, "Sit your ass down. The last thing I need is you coming in and turning my walls into Swiss cheese!"

But he insisted, "John, that thing is dangerous."

"No, that weapon you got is dangerous. I can get a porcupine out of my house with just a broom. So how about you go back home and enjoy the rest of your Sunday."

Randall sat his shotgun down on the lawn chair and said, "I will go home. But I'm coming back with my Louisville Slugger."

I didn't wait for Randall. I unlocked the door and went inside with Custer following, and left the door open so the varmint could escape. Everything seemed all right. There was just that tear in the window screen in back of my laundry room. I poked my head through and saw Shawn waving to me from my back yard... with a gun in his hand.

I guess the critter must have hopped onto my bar-b-q, then up to the sill. It tipped over my wooden clothes-drying rack, and that knocked one of my collectible signature NASCAR plates off the wall. Poor Dale. Split right down the middle. I bent down to pick up the pieces and about that time Randall showed up with a bat in his hand. He said the same thing, "Poor Dale."

We searched through the house but didn't find a thing. Custer was sniffing everywhere but didn't bark at all. I guess it must have slipped out when I wasn't looking.

\*

That whole week was quiet. But then Randall came over the following Saturday morning pretty upset, saying that Ralphie had run off, and they hadn't seen him since Thursday night. So, I told him that if either me or Custer caught wind of his dog, Randall would be the first to know. But he wasn't taking it too well. Randall looked pretty shook-up.

\*

Late on the following Monday night I had a lady-friend over, and I stepped out for a cigarette. I light it up and I hear this kind of, "Pssst... Pssst!"

It's Randall calling me over from his driveway. I wander over there and he's sitting in the bed of his pickup truck, looking out at Matchaponix Road. I chuckled, wondering what he's doing in such a situation in the middle of the night.

"Randall," I says, "what in the hell are you doing?"

But he shushes me like, "Quiet, watch the street lights."

"Huh?"

I looks at him pretty concerned-like. He's sitting on a mattress in the back of his truck, holding that old over-under of his again. I had to ask, "What are you doing with that gun?"

He says, "I keep it here, hide it under the lip of the bed. Just in case."

"In case of *what* exactly?"

"I don't know! That's the problem. Now quiet down already."

"Randall," I says, "it's illegal to keep a loaded weapon in your vehicle. You know that don't you?"

And then he turned, and looked me in the eye, with the moon reflecting off his glasses in a crazy kind of way, and he says, “You bow hunters are all alike, you know that? You got something against black powder.”

“Randall, it’s dangerous. Some kid could get a hold of that thing and blow his friggin foot off. Or worse!”

“Quiet down,” he says again. “Just look at the street for a minute.”

Now I given up on him. I figure I got nothing better to do than stand there beside him and finish my cigarette. Besides, the man lost his dog. He needs some company. The street light in front-a Randall’s house switched off and another one a little ways down the road turned on. Randall says, “Didja see that?”

“Uh, no. See what?”

“The streetlights. They keep turning them off and on. It’s to save electricity I think. But they keep the lights moving around on the road so it’s never dark in one spot for very long.”

“Ok,” I says. “That makes sense I guess.” My cigarette was finished but I stood there anyway, to see what he was getting at.

“Now watch that dark spot in front-a your house,” he says.

I figure I’m humoring the man by staying out there, but I watch anyways. I stood there with him for about five minutes, watching that spot. Just standing in dead silence. But then the street light flicked on, and I seen something! It was like some little, dark, spiky, furry thing, gone darting down the road towards where the last light just went out.

Randall says, “You see it?”

“Yea. What was that?”

“That’s what it was!” he says, getting excited. “That’s the thing that got into your house the other night!”

“Well, I never seen one of them before.”

“Me neither. I think I should name it. I discovered it.”

“And I’m surprised it hasn’t gotten run over yet.”

\*

They found Ralphie. I’m sad to say. He didn’t look too good. It looked like somebody worked him over real bad. And then they set him on the front porch. So when Randall left for work on Wednesday morning, he couldn’t help but see his dog lying in front of him. Dead to the world. Like somebody just ate him inside-out.

I kept Custer in the house after that. But that dog just wasn’t meant to be kept, locked up like that all the time. He’s got to go out and play, and take shits in the worst weather. And come back just smelling like wet dog.

I’d walk with him during the day, but I kept him in the back room at night. My garden got tore up after that. Custer wasn’t defending it any more.

And then one night I heard it. I remember I *heard* it. It was that sound, that just horrible fighting *sound*. Worst thing I ever heard. I popped right out of bed and ran downstairs, and saw my dog fighting that little bugger tooth to tooth! Custer was plainly getting the better of it, so I opened the back door, and, just as I thought, the little critter ran right past me, —went skittering past me on the tile floor. Last thing I needed was for those two to break more plates in there.

Custer followed it, of course. I tried my best to catch him on the way out, but he squeezed through the door. I ran behind him, looped around the house, headed towards the street in nothing but my pajamas. But then I tripped on something and twisted my ankle.

Now, if you're a veteran, you probably know that some wounds just never heal right. This was one of 'em. By luck I tripped in a tangent going right for Randall's pickup truck. Stumbling over there I fell against his truck, and saw the little critter had stopped in the street under the light. It was breathing real hard, and was watching Custer running towards it, like it just didn't know what to do. My dog *flew* towards it like he was just... *going* for that last yard on a running play.

And then the streetlight shut off. *Like that.* And I heard that awful sound again. But this time it was louder, and different, like there was another critter out there.

Those bright-ass lights Randall keeps on his front porch went on. And I seen it! Man, I saw these eyes the size of golf balls were just glowing bright like cat's eyes. It turned around and looked into the light like it didn't even have eyelids, facing straight at me. I never been so scared in my life. It was *twice* the size of a bulldog, and just standing over Custer's body, looking at me whilst the little one was eating the belly outta my dog.

I remembered where Randall kept that gun. Right under the lip where he said it was. Leaning against the side of his truck I aimed up real clean and calm while that *thing* come charging up on me from about thirty yards away.

I pulled the trigger and the gun went **click**.

Man, I thought I was dead for sure. I forgot that gun was an over-under. Rifle barrel had nothing in it. But by the time that *thing* was ten yards away I remembered the other trigger. The shotgun tore his face up with a big loud **BWAAA!** And he spun around, and him and the little one high-tailed it in the other direction.

I couldn't help but think, 'Thank the sweet Lord for Randall.'

\*

Whatever in hell that thing was, I still don't know. But it killed my dog. It killed my neighbor's dog. And I know there's more than one of 'em. Randall decided not to 'discover' it, if you catch what I'm saying. He figured that if he told any naturalists about this thing they'd probably say it was an endangered species, and that it would become illegal to hunt the bugger. Well, that's what I'm going to call it. The Bugger. Because it's got those big buggy eyes that light up and don't blink.

Now me and Randall are going to hunt the Buggers into extinction.